

“One of those Fortuitous Endowments of the Gods”:

Black to White Passing in Late 19th- / Early 20th-Century American Literature

An honors thesis for the Department of English

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## Introduction

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.

--W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk"

The color line is defined by dominant white society as a clearly delineated and permanent divide between "white" and "black" Americans. This barrier is not meant to be crossed or passed and racial identities can exist on only one side of the line. When W. E. B. Du Bois stated his belief that an entire century would be defined by this racial binary, the racism directed at the African-American side of the color line is only one part of the problem he identified. The fact that the distinction between black and white exists at all presents a larger issue because it eliminates the possibility of the more fluid or mixed racial identities that can exist outside of a binary. While Du Bois was an optically black American, he was also considered socially and legally to be an African American by virtue of his African ancestry. Because he fit the color line's dual definition of "blackness" – optically and legally, externally and internally – there was no way to change how his race was defined by the dominant social narrative.

For some Americans, however, having African ancestry does not mean that their socially assigned race corresponds to their racial optic. In spite of the color line's attempt to separate Americans into distinct racial categories, centuries of sexual violence and forced interracial unions resulted in a group of optically white Americans with African ancestry. This contradiction between white bodies and legal or social blackness exposes the myth of a racial binary because in order to fully express his or her identity, an optically white and legally black American would need to exist on both sides of the color line simultaneously, an impossible feat given the binary's goal of racial separation. However, rather than acknowledging the complex reality of race

American society and law came to label passing as a fiction, although for many passers a white racial identity constituted their reality. This contradiction between public fiction and private reality is a theme uniquely reflected in passing narratives written at the turn of the twentieth century that work to expose, question, and fight back against the realities of racism that affected African Americans<sup>1</sup> of all complexions in American society.

Passing narratives expose the trauma racism caused by showing light-skinned African Americans who would rather endure the shame of ignoring their African heritage and the psychological stress of living with the fear of exposure than face the racism they would experience as black Americans. This racial anxiety is revealed in narratives such as *An Imperative Duty* (1891) by William Dean Howells, in which the passer is deeply ashamed of her blackness. Because she is light enough to pass for white, she can therefore avoid any racist backlash as long as she rejects her African ancestry in favor of the privilege associated with optic whiteness. Though Howells makes it clear that he is aware of the fact that the color line is a social myth, I will argue that he trivializes the importance of race and the effects of racism in American society. At best this is not a constructive response to racism, and at worst this approach advocates for a society that diminishes the importance of race.

In contrast to the way Howells minimizes the magnitude of racism, I will demonstrate that Mark Twain and Nella Larsen write about passing to make more overt critiques of the discrimination which pervades American society. For example, in his text *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) Twain includes the story of a legally black man passing for white who commits murder to preserve his white identity. In the similarly violent resolution to the problem of racial exposure in

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<sup>1</sup> Although modern definitions of race have changed and some optically white Americans with African ancestry do not identify as “African-American” or “black” today, I will refer to optically white Americans with African ancestry as “African Americans” throughout my paper because it reflects the contemporary “one-drop” definition of race that dominated American racial ideology when the passing narratives I will discuss were written.

Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), the ambiguous ending depicts an optically white but legally black woman who is either murdered or commits suicide when her African ancestry is revealed publically. Although these texts use passing as a means of critiquing racism rather than trivializing it, they still fail to suggest a viable model for the ways in which African Americans could fight back against racism.

In contrast to Howells', Twain's and Larsen's texts, three additional passing narratives that I will examine – *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Frances E. W. Harper, *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* (1903) by Pauline Hopkins and *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929) by Jessie Redmon Fauset – transcend mere exposure and critique of the color line and actually propose ways in which racism could be overcome in American society. There is an important distinction, however, between eliminating *racism* and eliminating *race* from the American psyche. To move beyond *racism* would mean no longer writing laws, creating institutions or performing actions that cause psychological or physical trauma to Americans with African or African-American ancestry. To move beyond *race*, however, would mean undermining how the racial binary has shaped both white and African-American history and cultural memory. Denying the importance of race also means eliminating the opportunity to form an African American identity that can, in the right context, be a source of pride and power rather than a source of anguish. Neither Harper, Hopkins nor Fauset strives for a color-blind society free of racism and race; rather, they envision an America in which it is possible to maintain black pride without being at risk of mental or physical violence for doing so.

While all six of these texts are distinguished by the ways they use passing to make unique arguments about racism, there are common characteristics which connect the narratives as well. One defining feature of passing narratives exists in the distinction between intentional and

unintentional passing. Each text I will examine falls into one, if not both, of these categories, with unintentional passing narratives in certain cases turning into intentional passing narratives. In the first chapter of my thesis I will address unintentional passing, when the passer's parents or guardians make the decision to have their children pass for white without the children knowing that they are doing so. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, *Iola Leroy*, and *An Imperative Duty* each tell the story of children who pass for white unintentionally until a scene of revelation in which their legal race is revealed. In my second chapter, I will examine what happens after a scene of revelation, when the unintentional passer joins the ranks of passers in other texts that are optically white but know they are legally black. With this knowledge, passers are forced to decide whether they will claim a black identity as is the case in *Plum Bun*, *Iola Leroy*, and *An Imperative Duty*, or if they will choose to continue intentionally passing for white because they feel too ashamed or too threatened by racism to identify as African-American, a theme explored in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Passing*. Finally, the third chapter of my thesis will examine Hopkins' *Of One Blood*, which defies categorization as either an unintentional or intentional passing narrative because it combines various types of passing within the same text. By structuring my thesis around these different types of passing, I will be able to focus my argument on how and why the authors respond to racism in American society.

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While passing narratives have been and continue to be a part of the American literary landscape, this genre surged from the Nadir, or lowest point in African-American history, through the Harlem Renaissance (Kelley et al. ix). One reason passing became such a popular literary theme is the fact that after slavery was abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, the period of Radical Reconstruction (1867-1877) that followed saw no legislation created to

limit African-American rights (Hahn 163). From 1875 to 1883 African-American rights were legally protected under the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which mandated that “states must not deny equal access to public facilities for all citizens, regardless of race or prior slave status” (Davis 52). Furthermore, the Fourteenth Amendment’s passage in 1868 recognized the full humanity of African Americans with regards to their representation in Congress and in 1870 the Fifteenth Amendment enfranchised black male voters. These three pieces of legislation – the Civil Rights Act of 1875 and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments – demonstrate concrete gains in black political power during Reconstruction and represented, for a short time, a viable African-American voice in U.S. politics.

Although Reconstruction offered a brief respite from *de jure* racism, the rampant *de facto* discrimination that persisted during this period spoke otherwise. For example, while black men were legally guaranteed the right to vote some polls were “placed at inaccessible locations or on the land of hostile planters” and “[e]lection supervisors could ask unwarranted questions, make confusing demands, or open and close the polls at will,” resulting in the “effective disfranchisement” of black male voters in the face of the Fifteenth Amendment (Hahn 224). Furthermore, although African Americans had technically been freed from legal slavery, *de facto* economic slavery persisted in the form of sharecropping. Because tenant farmers paid rent on their land in the form of crops, and not cash, white landowners could were able to keep blacks in perpetual debt. Additionally, by taking the farmers’ source of food as payment and charging exorbitant prices in the town store where African Americans could buy food to supplement their meager harvests, landowners solidified this form of “new slavery” which, while not sanctioned by the law, still effectively barred African Americans from economic independence (Bair 3). Even though Reconstruction seemed like a time of progress in theory, the persistent

discrimination in society at large set the stage for the passing narratives that would appear during the next few decades.

It also seems that one of the reasons passing narratives became so popular at the turn of the twentieth century is because the political gains made for African Americans during Reconstruction were a true tease, cruelly providing blacks with a brief taste of political freedom only to see it taken away two decades later. “Effective” disfranchisement notwithstanding, African Americans experienced the actual loss of their rights when the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was overturned in 1883, a decision which justified legal segregation in public facilities and ushered in the era of Jim Crow and the Nadir (Davis 52). The Nadir, a period which lasted from the 1890s to the early 1900s, was defined not only by Jim Crow laws but also by increased lynchings, disfranchisement, and economic slavery in the form of sharecropping and tenant farming (Kelley et al. ix). Although *de facto* discrimination certainly existed during Reconstruction and continued to be an issue during the Nadir, the fact that the government created new legislation to institutionalize racism creates the context for understanding why these particular passing narratives appeared throughout the Nadir and into the Harlem Renaissance.

This is not to imply, however, that African Americans accepted this racism without a fight. In 1896, the Supreme Court heard the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in which Homer A. Plessy, a light-skinned African-American man, had boarded a “white” train car in Louisiana. His act defied the Louisiana Separate Car Act of 1890, which mandated that separate but equal facilities would be provided to white and black passengers on Louisiana trains (Bair 25). Initially, these segregated cars were deemed constitutional because the “black” and “white” cars were supposed to be of equal quality and provide the same experience to all passengers regardless of race. Although “separate-but-equal” was a concept that worked in theory, in reality



the “black” cars were inferior to “white” cars and did not provide black passengers with the same experience as their white counterparts (Bair 25). Rather than eliminating the Louisiana Separate Car Act, the Supreme Court instead ruled that Jim Crow legislation was constitutional and effectively undermined the authority of the Fourteenth Amendment (Bair 26).

In a similar display of anti-racist activism, Ida B. Wells took a stand against lynching and focused her actions on combating this extralegal form of racism. To make her message heard, Wells contributed editorials to Northern newspapers and gave lectures across the country decrying the physical and psychological threat to the African-American community (Bair 31). Additionally, Wells spoke out against the government’s reticence regarding these unpunished acts of violence, focusing especially on the fact that no legislation had been created to protect African Americans or to prosecute their murderers (Bair 30-31). Although lynching persisted in spite of Wells’ efforts, just as Jim Crow laws remained on the books despite Plessy’s actions, the fact that they acted out against this quotidian discrimination is a testament to the traumatizing ways racism affected the national African-American psyche.

What Wells and Plessy fought against were not individual instances of discrimination but an entire society founded on racist ideologies. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the biologicistic and scientific race theories of this time period, with a particular emphasis on the role of the “one-drop rule.” During the mid- to late-nineteenth century, theories about race were largely what Deborah McDowell calls “racist pseudoscience” based on “percentages and [ratios] of black blood to white [blood]” used to determine race (viii). This mix of “scientific and folk ideas” regarding racial classification contributed to the racism underlying what were actually socially constructed racial distinctions (Smedley 231). Although it is easy to gaze backwards from the twenty-first century and decry the myth of scientific racial categorization, prior to and

during the Nadir “[s]cience was objective and detached, at least by reputation, and people looked to science for those truths that resonated unsullied by politics or religion” (Smedley 232). For this reason, biologicistic theories regarding race abounded because science was able to “prove,” unequivocally, that racism was based on the empirical fact that African ancestry manifested in quantitative racial inferiority.

It was also during this time that race theory in the United States shifted away from the idea of humans as a single species, known as monogenesis, to the idea that humans were created as several species, or polygenesis. Charles White first articulated this theory in *An Account of the Regular Gradation of Man* (1799), in which he treated race as a series of physical categorizations. White looked to “what he thought were unvarying constitutional differences between black and white races in skeletal structure, muscles, tendons, cartilages, skin, hair, size of sex organs, and brains” (Smedley 232-33). From these physical differences White extrapolated that the broad category of “humans” should actually be divided into distinct species that, most problematically, had varying levels of intelligence depending on their race (Smedley 233-34).

Another work that had a large impact on nineteenth-century race theory was a seminal text entitled *Types of Mankind* (1854) that contains chapters by the most prominent race theorists of the day, including Dr. Josiah Nott, Samuel Morton, George Gliddon, and Louis Agassiz. This text provided “quantitative data” for racial difference and “succeeded in backing, with the awesome prestige of science, what were actually folk views of the Negro in the nineteenth century, expanded into racial ideology” (Smedley 240). As the monogenesis/polygenesis debate became the central focus of race theory during the second half of the nineteenth century and manifested in works such as *Types of Mankind*, contemporary authors of passing narratives

pointed out that these “scientists” had overlooked the fact that many Americans’ very existence contradicted this science and that these theories were simply racism wrapped up in scientific terminology.

Despite the scientific nature of these experiments examining racial difference, the motivations for such theorizing were far from objective. Although concrete data seemingly justified the racist assertions of texts like *An Account of the Regular Gradation of Man and Types of Mankind*, the anxiety surrounding miscegenation and racial “impurity” were the true catalysts for scientific inquiries regarding race. An ever-present fear was “the possibility that some black ‘blood’ might contaminate the white race and cause the deterioration of all that was noble, pure, and superior,” a clearly legitimate concern given the fact that some African Americans were light-skinned enough to pass for white, both in reality and reflected as a trope in the literature of the era (Smedley 245). In spite of (or perhaps because of) the “contamination” that was occurring by force and by choice, the necessity for a racial binary became quite clear. Allowing for identities other than “black” or “white” would upset the power structure’s delicate balance and acknowledge that whiteness had indeed become “impure.”

These notions of “impurity” and “contamination” are formally identified as the one-drop rule in the dominant racist ideology. One of the reasons “blacks” and “whites” were identified as separate species was based on the belief that “black blood” and “white blood” were empirically distinguishable. Another component of the one-drop rule was the law of “hypodescent” in which offspring assume their mother’s lower racial status and are automatically classified as African-American (Smedley 141). F. James Davis defines this racist ideology, noting: “[the] answer to the question ‘Who is black?’ has long been that a black is any person with *any* known African black ancestry... In the South it became known as the ‘one-drop rule,’ meaning that a single drop

of ‘black blood’ makes a person black” (5). The problem with the one-drop rule, however, is that it designates blackness as lesser than or inferior to whiteness, with “blackness” and “whiteness” defined according to the social and legal implications of identifying as white or African American, rather than the physical or optic “whiteness” or “blackness” of one’s skin. Passing, therefore, cannot exist without the one-drop rule because it allows for an “invisible blackness” to exist, rendering a person who is optically white African American and thereby forcing the historical trauma of racism upon him or her regardless of their optic race location.

Though the texts I will examine by Howells, Harper, Twain and Hopkins were written during the Nadir and were influenced heavily by “scientific” systems of racial classification, Fauset’s and Larsen’s texts were published during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. These later texts reflect two developments in American racial ideology: the solidification of the one-drop rule in the national consciousness, and a burgeoning sense of black pride, both of which occurred simultaneously – and seemingly in opposition to one another – during this time period (Davis 58). Although the one-drop rule allowed for a sort of blanket racism targeted at all Americans with a trace of African ancestry, African Americans reclaimed their marginalized identity as a source of pride that, in turn, greatly affected many African Americans’ opinions of passing. Originally, passing for white had functioned as a means of survival when slavery was still legal prior to the Civil War and when lynching posed a serious threat to African Americans at the end of the nineteenth century. However, during the Harlem Renaissance passing became a source of shame because it indicated that the passer was unwilling to take pride in his or her African or African-American ancestry. F. James Davis points to this shift when he notes that, after the turn of the twentieth century, “Those who do pass are acknowledging the one-drop rule but [they are] escaping its effects, not openly challenging it” (138). In other words, passing gives

power to the one-drop rule and the dominant white narrative while identifying as black – in spite of optic whiteness – weakens the stigma of blackness that the rule perpetuates. Beyond merely weakening the stigma of blackness, though, the Harlem Renaissance proved that African ancestry could be reclaimed as a source of creativity and power, while passing for white meant actively rejecting the opportunity to help shape a new African-American identity.

This historical division between the Nadir and the Harlem Renaissance is also reflected in the shift in literary movements that occurred during this time period. During the Nadir, the Realism movement dominated American literature although some exceptions, such as *Iola Leroy's* Sentimentalism that I will examine in Chapter I, do exist. In general, though, the American Realism movement is defined by its commitment to representing the minutiae of daily life in America and emphasizes the idea that “individuals were complex and often driven by contradictory motives” (“A Historical Overview” 18). Passing narratives, therefore, are a natural product of the Realism movement as they examine the complicated balance between pride and shame regarding a character’s race and the shifting sense of identity that would plague an optically white but legally black American. Although passing is the creation of a lived fiction in the context of a racist society, Realism treated this fiction as reality and recognized that whiteness represented only one part of a passer’s intricate sense of self.

In contrast to passing narratives written during the Nadir, texts written during the Harlem-Renaissance reflect the presence of the Modernism movement that displaced Realism at the start of World War I. In his work *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker identifies this shift from Realism to Modernism from an African-American literary historical perspective. As Baker notes, a defining feature of black literature during the Harlem Renaissance was “*the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery,*” a theory upon which he elaborates:

“The mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly to sting like a bee. The deformation of mastery, by contrast, is... action in the face of acknowledged adversaries” (15; 50). This meant that while some earlier African-American authors had produced texts that demonstrated their mastery of the dominant white form of literature, they had conformed to contemporary literary movements without necessarily subverting or deforming them to create an explicitly black narrative. Put another way, Audre Lorde writes: “[T]he master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (112). While using “the master’s tools” – in this case, racist language and dominant white literary forms – allowed for the temporary success of exposing racism in earlier passing narratives, the Harlem Renaissance ushered in a period of literary deformation and the use of new tools to give a genuine voice to African-American stories.

Deformation, then, follows the “mastery of form” and uses language in new ways to describe the African-American experience on African-American terms. Although there is the question of whether or not total deformation is possible in the context of the raced and racist English language, Harlem-Renaissance literature demonstrates a concerted effort at such deformation (Baker 11). Therefore, I will argue that the African-American authors I examine – Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen – each combine various genres within their texts to display a mastery of form while simultaneously using these different forms to create something new that allows them to present their arguments against racism through the lens of black pride, thus deforming their mastery and constructing a truly African-American literary voice. At the same time, from my racial location as a white critic Baker would argue that the very definition of true “deformation” means I might not recognize such subversion if it were presented to me. As Baker

writes, “the indigenous *sound* appears monstrous and deformed *only* to the intruder,” while the same “*sound*” that appears “deformed” to me is actually the clearest articulation of African-American thoughts for African-American readers (52). However, I would argue that Baker and Lorde maintain ideas about race that are too essentialist to begin the work of deconstructing the racial binary. Although white authors and critics have played the role of “intruders” and “masters” in the past, it would be detrimental to deny their knowledge and help in dismantling the structures they created.

## I. Accidental Whiteness: The Forced Fiction of Unintentional Passing

“So this means that we’re part black too,” I said, taking in the news. I had always bought into the idea of the American “melting pot,” and now I was an example of it. The idea thrilled me, as though I’d been reading a fascinating history book and then discovered my own name in the index. I felt like I mattered in a way that I hadn’t before.

--Bliss Broyard, “One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life – A Story of Race and Family Secrets”

Within the category of passing narratives, one key distinction is between texts in which characters pass for white either intentionally or unintentionally. This chapter will focus on the trope of unintentional passing, in which characters that have African ancestry are unaware of their heritage because their parents choose to have them pass for white. Authors such as Mark Twain, Frances E. W. Harper and William Dean Howells created such characters whose reality was, unbeknownst to them, a fiction of racial identity crafted by their parents. The reasons passing was examined as a theme by each of these authors ranges from evading slavery in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* by Twain and *Iola Leroy Or, Shadows Uplifted* by Frances E. W. Harper, to preventing a child from inheriting the shameful knowledge of her enslaved ancestors in *An Imperative Duty* by Howells. In addition to the different reasons for characters’ unintentional passing, in each case their passing makes a specific argument about the racism which moved their parents to create fictional identities. I will argue that while Harper used unintentional passing as a path to overcome racism and reclaim a black identity, and Twain wrote about passing to critique racist institutions, Howells did not recognize the powerful potential of passing as a literary theme and instead chose to use it as a method of minimizing the effects of racism.

Although the arguments about racism among these three authors are unique, these unintentional passing narratives are connected by a set of shared literary features. An important point of comparison is the scene of revelation that occurs in each text and in which it is revealed to the passer that he or she is legally considered black in spite of optic whiteness. These moments



of revelation connect the texts by creating a common dilemma for the passer who must choose either to continue passing for white or to claim a black identity. Although the ultimate outcome – the passer’s choice to continue living as a white American or not – varies from author to author, each revelation marks a rupture in the text during which the unintentional passer is thrown into a state of confusion about his or her racial affiliation. This disorientation manifests itself in an identity crisis in which the character’s white physical appearance must be reconciled with cultural mandates about the “invisible blackness” contained within the passer. In addition to the private nature of this quandary, the unintentional passer must now also deal with a racist society that will treat him or her totally differently despite the fact that only the social perception of his or her race, and not the pigment of his or her skin, changes during a scene of revelation.

Although Twain and Howells use this shift in public perception to argue that individual actions do not mitigate racism’s power, Harper effectively demonstrates how a moment of revelation and an identity crisis can be transformed into the opportunity for racial uplift.

In addition to the scenes of revelation that unify unintentional passing narratives, it is also necessary to examine the psychology behind choosing to have one’s children pass for white. Unintentional passing narratives can only exist when a character’s parents are themselves unaware of their ancestry or, as is the case with each text discussed in this chapter, a character’s parents make the conscious decision to have their children pass for white from the time of their birth until a point at which their African or African-American ancestry is revealed. In this sense, a sort of metanarrative exists within each example of unintentional passing in which fictional parents are also authors of the fiction that constitutes their child’s racial identity. Frequently, the unintentional passer’s parents consciously view their child’s passing as the creation of a beneficial fiction meant to mask their legal racial location in American society as African

Americans. But when the decision to pass is forced upon a character, as the novels by Twain, Harper, and Howells show, it serves as an incredibly deeply entrenched personal fiction that has a traumatic impact. Although the parents' motive was to completely prevent the identity crisis that arises for light-skinned African Americans in a racist society, when the illusion of the passer's white race location is destroyed, his or her consequent identity crisis simply has been delayed rather than ameliorated by their forced and unintentional passing.

From the research I have conducted regarding passing, it seems that many parents of light-skinned African-American children struggle with the question of whether or not they want to raise their children as African-American in a society founded on structural racism and marked by individual instances of racism. With regards to the conflict between optic and ideological race, Laura Browder notes that "Race may be a construction, but color remains a visual cue; and most Americans use visual, physiological cues to make their judgments about a person's racial identity. The constructions of racial and ethnic identities have the psychological weight of reality" (9). It would appear that for the parent of a child who is light-skinned enough to evade the "physiological cues" that would reveal their "racial and ethnic identities," it sometimes makes sense to have the child identify with the socially constructed white racial identity that matches the child's optic white racial identity as a means of physically and psychologically evading the trauma of racism.

To be sure, having skin light enough to pass can present a unique chance to subvert the system, even though this subversion requires conforming to an essentialist view of race in which a person cannot simultaneously exist as both black and white. That is, in a racist society that operates on a racial binary passing can allow some African Americans the greatest advantage possible in an inherently unequal system and can serve as a temporary, individual solution to the

more deeply rooted problem of racist discrimination. While aiming to create a society in which racial distinctions do not matter would certainly make the need for passing obsolete, passing narratives never have been (and likely never will be) created in a context “in which race did not matter.” As Toni Morrison explains, “Such a world, one free of racial hierarchy, is usually imagined or described as [a] dreamscape – Edenesque, utopian, so remote are the possibilities of its achievement” (3). In a way, black-to-white racial passing provides a glimpse of this world “free of racial hierarchy” because a passer’s very existence undermines scientific theories about race and demonstrates the way socially constructed race does not always correspond to optic race. However, although passing does in that sense provide the chance to subvert the color line, it is a method of *defiance* without becoming a way to *deconstruct* the racial binary. Although the passer’s existence makes a farce of biologicistic racial theories, the fact that passing forces him or her to adopt a white identity (rather than a race-less identity) still positions the passer within the racial binary. Therefore, while unintentional passing can function as a survival strategy in the short term, it in many ways seems to reinforce essentialist ideas about race it attempts to subvert. We see this demonstrated, I will argue, by the persistent racism Harper, Twain, and Howells address in their texts.

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Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* presents a dual case of unintentional passing in which two optically white babies – Chambers, who is legally black, and Tom Driscoll, who is legally white – are switched by the optically white but legally black (and therefore enslaved) Roxy, Chambers’ biological mother and Tom’s caretaker. One of the driving forces in the novel is Twain’s ability to replicate the country’s obsession with the legal classification of race to the point that two children with the same complexion would be subject to completely different sets

of laws. As Eric Sundquist describes the text, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* embodies “Twain’s nightmare measurement of both the failed vision of the masterwork and the further and seemingly irremediable decline, by the 1890s, in the prospects for African American civil rights” (“Mark Twain and Homer Plessy” 226). In contrast to the idealism exercised by Harper in *Iola Leroy* that I will examine later in this chapter, Twain wrote comfortably within the framework of the Realist movement, not permitting his text to serve as a blueprint for the elimination of racism but rather constructing it as a reflection of the discrimination that characterized American society particularly after Reconstruction had ended. Twain exemplifies this condemnation of legal racism in the way he describes Roxy’s decision to switch Chambers and Tom, allowing her the opportunity to invert the racial roles legally assigned by American society during the antebellum era – as long as her assignment of race to the switched children remains within the racial binary.

What makes Roxy’s decision to switch the children almost darkly comedic, however, is the fact that although “[for] all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody,” there is still “the one-sixteenth of her which was black [and] outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro” (Twain 9). By animating the “black sixteenth” of Roxy that “outvoted” the fifteen “white parts” of her person, Twain presents the idea that such a racial binary resulted in a divided self, an incomplete person who might have had light skin but was legally classified as black. The idea of a black Roxy “outvoting” a white Roxy presents the reader with an anthropomorphized image of the internal struggle which marks her experience as a light-skinned African-American woman (Gillman 90). In this case, Twain uses Roxy’s optically white skin and ability to pass in order to demonstrate the way racism results in a system in which a person with mixed racial heritage was constantly at battle with his or her identity. And while passing for white reconciles this struggle externally, the internal crisis of choosing whether to identify as black or white presented a real

dilemma for characters like Roxy whose optic race did not match her legal status as an African American.

Just as the black fraction of Roxy's ancestry outvotes her whiteness, her son Chambers is also subjected to the same degree of racial hyperclassification. Although Chambers "was thirty-one parts white" and one "part" black, there was no changing the fact that "he, too, was a slave, and by a fiction of law and custom a negro" (Twain 9). While Chambers "had blue eyes and flaxen curls like his white comrade [Tom]... even the father of the white child was able to tell the children apart – little as he had commerce with them – [only] by their clothes" (Twain 9). Despite the fact that Chambers and Tom share an identical optic race location and inhabit phenotypically "white" bodies, external markings such as clothes are the only means of differentiating their legal race location, which was in reality just as much of a fiction as their passing.

Because the different legal races of the two children are so obviously a social constructions in this context, it is also necessary to consider what Twain does not include in the text, namely that "the father of the white child," York Driscoll, is also implied to be the father of Chambers, the "black child." This raises the question of how many legally black women were raped by white men to produce a child like Chambers who was thirty-one thirty-seconds white. These silences in the narrative intentionally exclude the history of sexual violence that took place to make passing possible. As for the question of why Twain did not address this issue directly in the text, one response can be found in Adrian Piper's observation that "[racial] classification in this country... presupposes that two persons of different racial classifications cannot be biologically related, which is absurd" (252). By leaving the reason for Chambers and Roxy's racial "composition" unstated, Twain uses their ability to pass to critique both the myth that

African Americans and white Americans were not “biologically related” and the racism that accompanied this social fiction.

As a light-skinned African American woman Roxy is endowed with a keen understanding of the trauma Chambers will face as a child whose optic race does not match his legal race, demonstrated by the language which she uses to speak about slavery. Roxy decides to have her son pass for white because of the unjust system that would classify an optically white child as black, and she asks “What has my po’ baby done, dat he couldn’t have yo’ luck? He hain’t done noth’n’. God was good to you; why warn’t he good to him? Dey can’t sell you down de river. I hates yo’ pappy he hain’t got no heart – for niggers he hain’t, anyways. I hates him, en I could kill him!” (Twain 13). Although the content of Roxy’s speech questions the injustice of racism, her speech in and of itself allows Twain to make the point that optic race counts for close to nothing in a society that assigns race based on a set of legally defined criteria. Even in this moment when Roxy is given the chance to criticize the unfair system of American racial classification, her speech is written in “the language of slavery,” thus allowing Twain to “arbitrarily blacken her with it [her speech] as the slaveholders have arbitrarily made her invisible one-sixteenth black blood” the determining factor in assigning her legal race (Cox 18).

Although some of Roxy’s agency is compromised by the fact that she speaks “the language of slavery,” she still claims the power to assign race by switching her child with that of her master, effectively taking away Chambers’ white privilege by assigning him blackness during a dramatic scene of revelation. An earlier motivation for having Chambers (hereafter Tom) pass unintentionally was Roxy’s desire to protect her child from the psychological trauma of racism and the physical threat of being sold “down de river.” However, long after the switch has occurred and her son has adopted the mindset of a white, slave-owning male, Roxy uses the

situation to her advantage by essentially blackmailing her son, telling Tom “You’s a nigger! – bawn a nigger en a slave! – en you’s a nigger en a slave dis minute; en if I opens my mouf ole Marse Driscoll ’ll sell you down de river befo’ you is two days older den what you is now!” (Twain 49). Although Roxy herself is still a slave, through a loophole for optically white African Americans created by the “fiction of law and custom” that was slavery the enslaved becomes the enslaver by taking away her son’s claim to legal whiteness. At the same time, although she challenges the system of slavery Roxy must reinforce the legal racial binary that put her in this situation in the first place.

Just as Roxy’s language is raced during the moment of revelation, Tom uses racially coded language in his response and further reinforces Roxy’s decision to take away her son’s access to whiteness. After revealing to Tom that he is actually her son and therefore legally considered black, he responds by saying “It’s a thundering lie, you miserable old blatherskite,” also calling Roxy a “devil” and a “beast” (Twain 49). The obscure language Tom directs at Roxy, such as “blatherskite,” emphasizes her lack of education (read: systematically enforced ignorance) while the racially coded aspects of his retort, including words such as “devil” and “beast,” serve to dehumanize Roxy and emphasize society’s negative associations with the idea of “blackness.” While Tom is most likely upset with Roxy as an individual, his acrimonious response is not prompted solely by a personal vendetta against his mother. Tom’s outburst is also prompted by his knowledge that Roxy can strip away the foundation on which he had based his sense of self, effectively undermining the view he has always held of himself as a white American while he passed unintentionally (Marcus 202).

While the racial coding in Tom’s language acts as a manifestation of racism, Roxy’s raced language demonstrates the ways in which slavery was expressed beyond just physical

bondage to include the form of intellectual bondage<sup>2</sup> she experiences. The juxtaposition of Roxy's "black" speech with her "white" skin not only demonstrates the way Twain undermines her political agency<sup>3</sup>, but it also highlights how passing for white advanced his argument regarding the absurd intersection of U.S. law and race embodied by the one-drop rule that defines Roxy's legal race. As F. James Davis writes, "The one-drop rule has long been taken for granted throughout the United States by whites and blacks alike, and the federal courts have taken 'judicial notice' of it as being a matter of common knowledge... In the United States there are still complex, major issues about the opportunities and rights of blacks, but none concerning how we define who is black" (15). Although it might appear that Roxy's limited access to educational resources or schooling is the problem at hand, the deeper issue is the way in which the society defines Roxy's race and not the more topical problem of the way she is treated as a member of that race. While the one-drop rule's transition from "common knowledge" to federal law helped to lay the foundation for the nation's definition of race, it stands as a critique of our society that even with an entire genre of literature that shows the guilt, shame and psychological trauma that authors such as Twain wrote about to make an argument about the unfair internal and external violence inflicted by racism, a woman like Roxy would still be defined as "black" today.

The one-drop rule's role in federal law also figures prominently in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, in which the optically white and legally black title character is remanded to slavery during the Civil War when the "secret" of her African heritage is discovered. *Iola Leroy* also differs from Twain's text, however, because even as Realism began to gain a foothold in American

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<sup>2</sup> In this instance, I am using the term "intellectual bondage" to refer to the fact that African-American slaves were the only people in American history for whom becoming literate was made illegal. See Nikky Finney's 2011 National Book Awards Acceptance Speech for Poetry.

<sup>3</sup> "Political agency" is used here not to mean legally protected political rights, which African Americans did not have at this time, but rather speaks to the idea that even without an official voice in American politics, Twain still provides Roxy with this speech as an opportunity to critique the system of American racism and to make an overtly political statement even in the absence of more concrete or legally recognized voice in American politics.



literature and the Sentimentalist movement was openly challenged many Realists such as Twain and Howells, Harper still chose to write *Iola Leroy* as a Sentimental novel in 1892. Although her Realist contemporaries believed in literature's "moral obligation" to painstakingly recreate all aspects of life as a means of rebelling against the "extreme idealizations of Sentimentalism," Harper's marked emphasis on idealized characters and an emotionally charged plot creates a passing narrative that relies on its emotional appeal to mobilize readers to take political action, specifically the "uplift" of the African American race ("A Historical Overview" 20; Pfeiffer 27). That is, rather than using Realism to depict the horrors of slavery that would spur readers to fight back, *Iola Leroy*'s sentimentality served as a means of emotionally impacting those who still did not feel driven to take up the cause of "racial uplift." Harper's deliberate decision to write a Sentimental work rather than a Realist work allows her to use passing as a way to expose the negative psychological impacts of unintentional passing, a literary strategy whose power becomes especially obvious during the scene in which the secret of Iola's race is revealed, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Unintentional passing, then, is a decision in which the passer's parents believe the ultimate psychological trauma of passing will be less painful to endure than the racism their child would confront by openly identifying as African-American. In the case of *Iola Leroy*, Marie and Eugene Leroy were not in agreement about the decision to have their children pass. During a discussion about whether or not they should take advantage of their children's optically white skin, Marie expresses her concern that while the children's passing might be a secret within the household, it is possible that others will guess or discover that Iola and her brother, Harry, are legally black, doubling the trauma of racism by sending the children the message that their parents are ashamed of their African heritage. "It will not be long before Iola will notice the

offishness of girls of her own age,” Marie worries, “and the scornful glances which, even now, I think, are leveled at her” (Harper 80). Although Marie disagrees with her husband on this front and presents a valid argument against passing, it is hard to ignore what is left unsaid in the text: that at the intersection of blackness and femaleness, Marie’s opinion is given less weight than that of her white husband who, despite Marie’s legitimate concerns, ultimately makes the decision to have their children pass for white.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Leroy’s intended to keep their children from experiencing the psychological damage of slavery and racism, Marie’s suspicion that others would decipher her children’s race holds true in a way that threatens the children’s future chances of passing in the South and ultimately results in the decision to send Iola and Harry to boarding schools in the North. Marie relates one of these incidents to her husband, telling Eugene that “Yesterday Harry came crying to me, and told me that one of the neighbor’s boys had called him ‘nigger’” (Harper 80). In a similar scene, James Weldon Johnson’s protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) remembers an incident in which the school principal visited his classroom and said “‘I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment.’ I [the Ex-Colored Man] rose with the others. The teacher looked at me and, calling my name, said: ‘You sit down for the present, and rise with the others’... A few of the white boys jeered me, saying: ‘Oh, you’re a nigger too’” (401-2). In both of these instances, it quickly becomes apparent that passing does not function in a vacuum and once children who are passing unintentionally are informed about their racial heritage by their peers, the parents no longer have control over their children’s knowledge of their legal race. In this manner Harper and Johnson critique both the success and the ethics of

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to acknowledge that while I briefly touch on questions of gender in this passage and in a few other places throughout my thesis, I did not feel that the space and time constraints of this project would have allowed me to give a thorough treatment of gender and other factors, such as class and sexual orientation, in addition to my arguments regarding race.

unintentional passing by demonstrating its inevitable failure and the painful identity crisis caused by an unexpected revelation from one's peers.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this identity crisis is exacerbated by the fact that children who pass unintentionally essentially have been taught that it is preferable to lie about their identities than to change the way those identities are perceived in a racist society.

As a child Iola Leroy was intentionally kept unaware of the fact that her mother, Marie, was a former slave who was light-skinned enough to pass as white after marrying her owner, Eugene Leroy. Though Iola spends the majority of her childhood at a boarding school in the North, after her father's death she returns home to North Carolina only to find out that she is legally black and has been "remanded" to slavery (Harper 105). In response to this revelation, "An expression of horror and anguish swept over Iola's face, and, turning deathly pale, she exclaimed, 'Oh, mother, it can't be so! You must be dreaming!'" (Harper 105). While scenes of revelation often feature highly emotional responses from the passer, Harper's use of language such as "horror" and "anguish" to describe Iola's hyperemotional response appeals to the reader's own emotions. In addition to implicating the reader in the story on an emotional level, the unchecked sentimentality in *Iola Leroy* also allows the text to function as "a novel whose boldness of critique is effectively masked by sentimental Victorian propriety," distinguishing it from the style of contemporary Realist novels in spite of their shared theme of unintentional passing (Pfeiffer 24).

Furthermore, the idealized space Harper creates in which Iola can work towards racial uplift functions effectively within the context of a Sentimental novel, and stands in contrast to the Realism that tinges Howells and Twain's pessimistic views regarding the possibility, in their

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<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note why *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is not given further consideration in my thesis. While I recognize that Johnson's text an extremely complex passing narrative that must be considered in a study such as this, I would have wanted to devote an entire chapter to *The Autobiography*, as I do with Hopkins' *Of One Blood*, to allow for the thorough analysis and consideration it merits. Given the time and space constraints of this project, however, I thought it best to focus more on the texts I have examined in greater detail in my thesis rather providing an underdeveloped critique of Johnson's work.

texts, of reclaiming a black identity as a response to racism. At the end of the text, Harper addresses the reader: “From threads of fact and fiction I have woven a story whose mission will not be in vain if it awakes in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christlike humanity in behalf of those whom the fortunes of war threw, homeless, ignorant and poor, upon the threshold of a new era” (282). The expressly political motivation of Harper’s work functions within the realm of the Sentimental and the ideal, directly appealing to “the hearts of our countrymen.” Harper attempts to combat the racism of the United States by forcing readers to internalize the plight of a parent so ashamed of her race that the survival of her children – psychologically and physically – is dependent on their denial of any African-American heritage.

Although Harper’s overt call to political action distinguishes her text from Howells’ or Twain’s, all three works share the common feature of raced language employed during a scene of revelation to mark the shift from a white to a black body. Not only does Iola react to the fact of her blackness with “horror” and “anguish,” she also turns “deathly pale” upon receiving this news (Harper 105). Although her skin is the same shade it has always been, the fact that her complexion is now described as a “deathly” white symbolizes the end of Iola’s white identity. Although this revelation certainly signifies the death of Iola’s whiteness, from a non-white perspective this moment also symbolizes a rebirth and the beginning of a new life with a black identity. Even though Iola has lost the privileges associated with whiteness, an argument can be made for the fact that passing itself can also “resemble the experience of death, or may at least be experienced as a form of social death” (Sollors 253). I would argue, however, that although it might be the parents’ intention to orchestrate the “social death” of their child’s black identity, unintentional passing in the fictions I discuss never amounts to anything more than a temporary

break from a black identity in favor of a white one, constituting more of a hiatus than an actual death. While the fictitious white identity definitively dies during a scene of revelation, the black identity is merely *re-revealed* because it was only obscured, not eliminated, by passing.

A similar “social death” occurs in Howells’ *An Imperative Duty* when Rhoda Aldgate, a legally black but optically white woman, has unintentionally passed for white her entire life because Rhoda’s guardian decided never revealed her charge’s racial heritage. When Rhoda’s Aunt Caroline finally does decide to reveal this secret to her niece, she hints at something “dishonorable” that has happened in Rhoda’s history and begins by revealing that Rhoda’s grandmother did not marry her grandfather (Howells 50). Thinking the worst is over, Rhoda says:

“Oh!... That was how the dishonor –” She stopped, with an absent stare fixed upon her aunt, who waited in silence for her to realize this evil which was still so far short of the worst. Where she sat she could not see the blush of shame that gradually stained the girl’s face to her throat and forehead. “Who was she?” Mrs. Meredith tried to think how the words would sound as she said them, and simultaneously she said them, “She was his slave.” The girl was silent and motionless. With her head defined against the open window, her face showed quite black toward her aunt, as if the fact of her mother’s race had remanded her to its primordial hue in touching her consciousness. (50)

As during the other scenes of revelation I have discussed, there is a particular emphasis on the symbolic change from a white to a black body. Although Rhoda is optically white, as the secret is revealed a “blush of shame gradually stains her face,” literally coloring her skin and causing her to appear darker. However, the words “shame” and “stain” do not place this revelation in a

positive light, implying that Rhoda has become tainted and impure with the accession of this knowledge. Furthermore, the narrator notes that “with her head defined against the open window, her face showed quite black,” essentially making the transformation complete. Against her will, Rhoda has become black, albeit only legally and in spite of Howell’s carefully crafted description of blush and shadows that attempt to make Rhoda appear optically black.

It is necessary, then, to try to understand why Aunt Caroline decides that Rhoda must hide or abandon her African-American heritage. Rather than the survival instincts displayed by Roxy in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Aunt Caroline’s decision seems to come from a place of shame rather than the preservation of her niece’s safety. Aunt Caroline’s concern lies not with Rhoda, who already appears white, but with Rhoda’s children and the potential for atavism. Dr. Olney, Rhoda’s love interest and Aunt Caroline’s physician, describes atavism as “instances in which the parent of mixed race could not be known from a white person, and yet the child reverts to the negro type in color and feature and character” (Howells 27). In this passage, what is left unsaid but strongly implied is Aunt Caroline’s fear of optically black bodies. Although Rhoda is legally black, she appears optically white and therefore does not present any concern to her Aunt. The thought of Rhoda producing a black child, however, is a realistic fear for Aunt Caroline and prompts her to finally reveal to Rhoda’s racial background as the latter seriously contemplates marriage and beginning a family. Aunt Caroline’s obsession with atavism “suggests a preoccupation with a culture in retrograde” during the aftermath of the Civil War and the steady increase in immigration to the United States (Rossetti 173). Though these might have seemed like appropriate intentions, Aunt Caroline ultimately ends up sending her niece into an identity crisis and alienates Rhoda as she struggles to come to terms with her new racial identity. In this way, passing enables racism because it functions as a manifestation of the shame one feels about

his or her African or African-American heritage after internalizing racism's message of inferiority.

Although certain common traits link these unintentional passing narratives, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *An Imperative Duty* grew out of very different literary movements than *Iola Leroy*. Contrary to the Sentimentalism and idealism that define Harper's writing, it is important to consider Howells' choice to communicate a passing narrative through a Realist framework when discussing the intended impact of his writing. "By emphasizing the aesthetic value of the real over that of the ideal," Kathleen Pfeiffer argues, "Howells not only questions the art value of melodramatic, romantic fiction, he also questions its political import" (40). Questioning the value and import of Harper's Sentimental novel appears not only to question the validity of her work but the validity of her experiences as a black woman in the United States. It has been noted that a central conflict in Howell's writing existed between "his belief in the universality of human nature... [and] the premises of racial determinism" (Nettels 72). I would argue, however, that the most problematic aspect of this conflict is not the fact that Howells subscribed to the idea of racial determinism but that he held a "belief in the universality of human nature." Although *An Imperative Duty* and *Iola Leroy* both address the issue of black to white racial passing Howells, as a white male, and Harper, as a black female, cannot be said to have lived through a universal set of experiences, perhaps shedding some light on why *Iola Leroy*, though published the same year as *An Imperative Duty*, could not have been written as a Realist novel.

On a broader level, Howells' writing serves to illuminate an important contradiction that arose in unintentional passing narratives, namely that the fiction of passing can ultimately become a reality for unintentional passers. *An Imperative Duty* speaks to this sense of fiction-as-reality on multiple levels, specifically with regards to Aunt Caroline who acts as "the 'author' of

the ‘fiction’ that allows Rhoda to live her life” believing she is white and not black (Pfeiffer 48). When combined with the fiction of law and custom that was the contemporary legal definition of race, Howells’ attempt at Realism is largely supported by his inclusion of all the different types of fiction that compose his characters’ reality. Therefore, scenes of revelation function as the moment when the fiction of passing is stripped away to reveal the reality, in addition to serving as a point of conflict in a passing narrative. Just as with *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Iola Leroy*, the moment during which Rhoda’s black identity is revealed in *An Imperative Duty* presents a turning point for the character in which she is essentially given the responsibility of choosing a black or white identity, in one sense providing a new source of racial agency – as long as the choice remains within the racial binary. Therefore, after the revelation occurs, the passer has an important decision to make in each of these texts: to continue living with a fictitious identity and to intentionally pass as white; or, to reject their optic whiteness and publicly claim a black identity, a critical point which I will examine in the next chapter.



## II. Stories of Survival and Shame: Intentional Passing and Visions of Black Pride

On sunny summer Sunday afternoons in Harlem  
when the air is one interminable ball game  
and grandma cannot get her gospel hymns  
from the Saints of God in Christ  
on account of the Dodgers on the radio,  
on sunny Sunday afternoons  
when the kids look all new  
and far too clean to stay that way,  
and Harlem has its  
washed-and-ironed-and-cleaned-best out,  
the ones who've crossed the line  
to live downtown  
miss you,  
Harlem of the bitter dream  
since their dream has  
come true.

--Langston Hughes, "Passing"

In contrast to unintentional passing narratives, some texts employ passing as a conscious decision made by a character that recognizes the implications of appearing optically white but being legally defined as black. Oftentimes, an unintentional passing narrative has the potential to turn into an intentional passing narrative after a scene of revelation, during which a character must choose whether he or she will make the conscious decision to continue passing for white or if they will publicly identify as African American. Alternatively, some texts bypass the trope of unintentional passing and begin with the internal struggle of whether or not to intentionally pass for white. By placing *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, *Passing* by Nella Larsen and *Plum Bun* by Jessie Redmon Fauset in conversation with one another, the first section of this chapter will examine the narratives of intentional passers who wish to pass indefinitely and have no plans to ever identify as black. This choice to actively pass for white additionally raises the question not only of physical passing but also of what Giulia Fabi has termed "ideological passing" in which there is a shift from "whiteness as a mark without to whiteness as a mark within," creating a contrast with those characters that physically pass for white but maintain a private black identity (Fabi

93). These types of intentional passing narratives present a character's less progressive response to racism, in which the character retreats into white society rather than pushing for any sort of social reform.

A second type of intentional passing that I examine in this chapter has to do with characters that intentionally pass for white but ultimately choose to reveal themselves. For certain reasons the passer might choose to be white when it is convenient – for example, a character's black identity might be public knowledge in the context of black society, but he or she chooses to pass in white society – or, in some cases, the passer will identify as white in both black and white contexts until a scene of auto-revelation occurs in which the character publicly rejects his or her white identity. The latter choice, to publicly reveal oneself as black, is a theme that occurs in *Plum Bun*, *Iola Leroy*, and *An Imperative Duty*, which I will discuss in the second section of this chapter. These scenes of auto-revelation create an important contrast with unintentional passing and intentional passing without the intent to reveal oneself because they represent a proud and active reclamation of a black identity as a productive and positive response to racism of the time.

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Even though the theme of black-to-white racial passing functions because of one's ability to exploit his or her optic race and external appearance, the internal effects of passing, especially the shame of feeling that blackness can never be a path to success in the United States, have deep implications for one's identity and sense of self worth. Whereas unintentional passing reveals the ease with which one could subvert the American racial binary – the “how” of passing – intentional passing narratives reveal the “why” of passing and provide a more direct answer to the questions of identity so often raised by the decision to pass.

In the case of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the legally black but optically white Tom Driscoll makes such a decision to pass intentionally because, after Roxy reveals that he has been passing for white in a private setting, he is still able to – and chooses to – maintain his white identity in public in spite of the knowledge that he is legally black. After learning about this African ancestry, Tom asks himself “Why were niggers *and* whites made? What crime did the uncreated first nigger commit that the curse of birth was decreed for him? ... How hard the nigger’s fate seems, this morning! – yet until last night such a thought never entered my head” (Twain 53). One of the more interesting features of this speech is the fact that Tom addresses blackness from a third-person perspective, noting “How hard the nigger’s fate seems,” and not how hard his *own* fate seems as a legally black man because he does not yet or refuses to see himself as an African-American. As George Marcus notes, after this scene of revelation Tom is “both hyper and painfully aware of his dual identity” and “sees himself as doubled with the racial doppelganger within gaining control over his former whole self, but only momentarily” (203). This scene of revelation ruptures Tom’s cohesive sense of identity as a white man, now forcing him to reconcile both the white and black aspects of his identity in spite of his attempts at passing to preserve his optic and ideological whiteness.

In addition to his refusal to identify as black, Tom also views blackness as a “crime,” acting upon this shame as the basis for his decision to continue passing for white (Twain 53). In describing the “groundless shame of the inadvertent imposter” that Tom experiences, Adrian Piper writes that “[for] this kind of shame, you don’t actually need to have done anything wrong... The devaluation of status consequent on such exposure is, then, absolute, and the suspicion of fraudulence spreads to all areas of interaction” (235). Although Tom continues to pass as white, Piper is correct in her observation that while Tom might decide to continue

physically passing, his fear of being publicly revealed indicates that the ideological passing he experienced prior to Roxy's revelation is no longer possible. After the moment of revelation, a particular "suspicion of fraudulence" will color all of Tom's future interactions with both the white and black residents of Dawson's Landing, *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* fictional setting.

In spite of this fear of his "fraudulence" being revealed, Tom continues to live as a white man until the final pages of the novel when his legal race is dramatically revealed during the course of his father's murder trial. After David "Pudd'nhead" Wilson has laid out all of the evidence to incriminate the murderer, he boldly states:

"The murderer of your friend and mine – York Driscoll of the generous hand and the kindly spirit – sits in among you. Valet de Chambre, negro and slave – falsely called Thomas á Becket Driscoll – make upon the window the finger-prints that will hang you!" Tom turned his ashen face imploringly toward the speaker, made some impotent movement with his white lips, then slid limp and lifeless to the floor. (Twain 141)

In this sensationalistic scene of revelation, Pudd'nhead Wilson becomes the arbiter of *de jure* race, using legal definitions to assign Tom blackness in spite of his optic whiteness. It is also important to contrast this definition of race with *de facto* definitions of race, which persisted beyond the end of slavery in the form of the socially accepted one-drop rule that, while in many cases no longer functioning as a way to legally define race, still persisted as the foundation of the way race was defined in society (Wald 12). However, the very fact that race could be defined in a courtroom alerts us to the presence of another "social fiction," namely the fiction that "whiteness" inherently implies racial purity (Gillman 89). By "othering" Tom as black, despite his light skin, Pudd'nhead Wilson plays into the myth that if no blacks are allowed to pass, the

threat of miscegenation itself will be neutralized. This reasoning is patently false, however, when race is viewed on a spectrum rather than a binary because when the one-drop mentality is abandoned, the idea of “miscegenation” ceases to exist.

Similar to the scenes of revelation in *Iola Leroy* and *An Imperative Duty*, this public revelation in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is also characterized by language that symbolically marks the death of Tom's white identity. By emphasizing Tom's “ashen face” and the “impotent movement” of his “white lips” the reader is presented with the physical embodiment of what is, in actuality, the intangible death of Tom's white self. In terms of the historical context in which Twain wrote this scene, it is necessary to consider the legal and cultural developments in conversations regarding “the South's ‘race problem’” that described the tension between public discourse about race and the private struggle to form an empowered identity outside of this discourse (Gillman 95). It would have been anachronistic for Tom to have had a more complex identity that encompassed his white and black heritage. Furthermore, passing narratives can only function in the context of a racial binary because “whiteness” and “blackness” must be seen as opposing forces that force passers to choose a side, rather than creating the option to exist on a spectrum that would eliminate the need for passing. Therefore, the almost physical death of Tom's white self is a fundamental part of the passing narrative structure and becomes, apparently, his only viable response to racism where the law is involved.

While Tom Driscoll makes the conscious decision to pass in all situations, certain fictional passers, such as Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, also pass intentionally but do so selectively. Clare, an optically white woman with African-American ancestry, is known by certain other characters in the black community as a black woman. However, in other areas of her life Clare chooses to pass for a white woman and allows the context of a social situation to

determine the race with which she chooses to identify. Although it is not explicitly stated in the text, there seem to be two reasons for why Clare chooses to pass only at certain points in the text. First, there is Clare's reasoning that it is easier to be a white person in a white-dominant society. As she tells her friend Irene Redfield, also an African-American woman with skin light enough to pass, "You'd be surprised, 'Rene, how much easier that is with white people than us. Maybe because there are so many more of them, or maybe because they are secure and so don't have to bother. I've never quite decided" (Larsen 37). Although there is a faint sense of racial solidarity implied by Clare's use of "us-them" terminology, it can seem at times that Clare is a racial opportunist who knows when to identify as black in order to take advantage of the situation in a way that benefits her. Clare's reasoning seems to ask a simple "Why not?" in response to the question of why she rejects her blackness when it's convenient and why she takes advantage of a system which continues to oppress darker-skinned men and women who share her African-American ancestry.

On a more personal level we also see Clare passing for white in her marriage, which probably began as a means of social climbing but becomes an indefinite masquerade out of the need for self-preservation. Upon first meeting Clare's husband, Jack Bellew, Irene receives a glimpse of the internal workings of Clare's marriage when he greets his wife by saying "Hello, Nig" (Larsen 66). When Clare prompts Jack to explain the meaning of this greeting, he states: "When we were first married, she was as white as – as – well as white as a lily. But I declare she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger" (Larsen 67). The most telling aspect of this passage can be found in Jack's use of a lily – something beautiful, white, and pure – as a metaphor for the way his wife used to (and should) appear. In contrast to this whiteness and purity is the language used

to describe the fear and the threat that Clare will “find she’s turned into a nigger,” as if blackness were a curse that could descend upon her against her will.

Although she does not reveal Clare as actually having African-American ancestry, Irene presses Jack on the subject of blackness, asking “So you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew?” (Larsen 69). However, “dislike” is not a strong enough word for Jack, who responds: “You got me wrong there, Mrs. Redfield. Nothing like that at all. I don’t dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she’s trying to turn into one. She wouldn’t have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. Not that I’d want her to. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils” (Larsen 69-70). Although Jack claims his racism is rooted in hatred, this opinion seems to be rooted much more deeply in fear than in distaste, signaled by the fact that African Americans “give [him] the creeps.” Additionally, as Gayle Wald notes, passing as a means of survival is simply a byproduct of the fact that Clare placed herself in this hostile environment in the first place, initially passing for white in an “opportunistic and deceitful” scheme “which she justifies as a means of circumventing racial segregation” when, in reality, her greatest concern is “self-advancement” (48). Though Clare might not have initially recognized the extent of Jack’s racism in her pursuit of high society (read: white society), his rhetoric of hatred and his demonization of African Americans ultimately necessitate passing as a means for Clare to survive in her marriage.

But Clare’s intentional passing does not extend to all areas of her life. Her relationship with Irene and the Redfield family demonstrates Clare’s dual need to feel accepted by both whites and blacks, depending on what the social context requires (Wall 105). However, as the dramatic scene of revelation at the end of the text indicates, intentional passing is not a realistic means of establishing the fluid racial identity Clare desires. While attending a party with Irene

and her black friends, Clare is “found out” when Jack barges in and, upon seeing his wife, says “So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!” (Larsen 208). Once again, it seems that the apparent hatred that fuels Jack’s anger is actually caused by a different emotion: in this case, it is a sense of shame that speaks to the idea of what could be termed as “racial cuckoldry.” Jack’s identity was founded on a notion of purity and whiteness even though everyone at the party knew he was actually in a “mixed race” marriage, creating a particular sense of shame for him because it shatters the myth of his whiteness.

Not only does Jack’s racially charged diction express his anger and shame during this revelation, the narrator also describes the tone of Jack’s voice during this outburst as “a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain” (Larsen 208). This speech is then followed by a moment of confusion during which the reader is told that Clare has fallen or been pushed to her death from a sixth story window, to which “There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony” (Larsen 209). In both instances, there is the sense that Larsen is attempting to dehumanize Jack in the same way he dehumanized his wife by using animalistic words like “snarl” and “moan,” and the fact that he makes “a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony.” At the same time, however, Jack is also *humanized* by the very raw and real emotion he instinctively displays at the sight of his wife’s death, exhibiting unconscious and visceral reactions as a demonstration of the humanity that exists independent of artificially constructed binaries, such as race. Perhaps, then, this language of animalization is not to be interpreted negatively but as representing shared human emotion outside the social construct of race. Although on the surface it appears that Clare’s only response to racism is death, buried beneath that seems to be the argument that the universality of human emotion – represented by the



language of animalization that exposes Jack's truest emotions – will be the only way to eradicate racism.

Although Clare had intended to pass for her entire life, once the secret of her African-American ancestry was revealed the white and black aspects of her identity could not exist simultaneously, therefore negating her ability to remain part of the narrative when the fiction of her passing was exposed to reality. As Martha Cutter notes of Clare, “To assume a single identity in a world in which identity itself is often a performance – a mask, a public persona – is to ensure psychological suicide” (76). This also raises the question of whether the text's ambiguous ending has another possibility, specifically the question of Clare's death not being an accident or a murder but a “psychological suicide” manifested as an actual suicide. After Clare's realization that her marriage – and therefore her whiteness – had been stripped away from her upon Jack's appearance at the party, this inability to reconcile her mixed-race identity left her with no other choice but to kill herself. Clare's existence was unstable and unsustainable because passing required her to cross and re-cross the color line, forcing her to stick to a racial binary when in reality she was attempting to “[deny] all the boundaries that the other characters work so hard to establish and maintain,” including boundaries of “race, class, and even sexuality” (Cutter 89). Just as Clare's life personified the struggle to create a malleable and intentionally inconsistent identity as a means of expressing her true self, the ambiguity surrounding her death seems to symbolize the difficulty of achieving such a goal. Racial passing was the closest she could come to transcending racial barriers, a weak solution in and of itself but possibly the only solution in a racist society (Cutter 96).

In contrast to the manner in which Clare Kendry's intentional passing was used as a means of self-preservation and social advancement, there are also instances in which passing is

used simply as a means of diversion or entertainment. In Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* we are introduced to the Murray family which consists of two African-American parents, one of whom is optically black (Junius) and the other whom is optically white (Mattie), with their two daughters mirroring their parents, the optically black Virginia and the optically white Angela.<sup>6</sup> Although her father is too dark to pass, Angela learns from her mother the ways in which she can manipulate the inconsistency between her legal and optic race to flout the absurd racial classifications of American society. A break occurs, however, when Angela ceases to view passing as a mere diversion and instead sees it as a means of social advancement like Clare Kendry and Tom Driscoll before her. The narrator notes that "Colour [sic] or rather the lack of it seemed to the child the one absolute prerequisite to the life of which she was always dreaming... the mere possession of a black or a white skin, that was clearly one of those fortuitous endowments of the gods... It was from her mother that Angela learned the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness" (Fauset 13-14). Angela sees passing not as a means to an end, but as an end in and of itself. Instead of exploiting her optic race to succeed as an ideologically black woman in a white woman's body, she wants *to be* a white woman, physically and mentally. The idea that "black skin" or "white skin" is a direct path to success is problematic because it places an excessive amount of importance on the physical, creating a rupture between the mind and the body that leaves little room for Angela (or any other optically white and ideologically black characters) to develop an identity that incorporates all aspects of their heritage and their current physical appearance into a more fluid identity.

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<sup>6</sup> It is also important to note that "optically black" does not imply the same consistency of skin color as "optically white," and might be better defined as "optically non-white" to truly capture the influence of the one-drop mentality that classifies any appearance that is not purely white or fair as black, ignoring the much greater variation of skin color that exists within the category of optic "blackness" than exists with optic whiteness.

Angela begins to intentionally pass for white as early as her elementary and middle school years until she is revealed by her classmate, Esther Bayliss. When Angela is nominated for the position of class treasurer, Esther speaks out and prompts the following exchange between Angela and Mary, her white friend:

Esther Bayliss pushed forward: "I don't know how it is with the rest of you, but I should have to think twice before I'd trust my subscription money to a coloured girl." Mary said in utter astonishment: "Coloured, why what are you talking about? Who's coloured?" "Angela, Angela Murray, that's who's coloured. At least she used to be when we all went to school at Eighteenth and Oxford." Mary said again: "Coloured!... Angela you never told me you were coloured!" Angela's voice was as amazed as her own: "Tell you that I was coloured! Why of course I never told you that I was coloured! Why should I?" (Fauset 43-4)

It seems that Mary's reaction to this revelation ("Angela, you never told me you were coloured!") embodies another reason that Angela might have chosen to pass. In addition to social advancement, passing eliminates the need to constantly justify her optic race when it did not coincide with her legal race. The fact that Angela "embodies" a "racial dichotomy... turns what was conceived of as a natural opposition into a societal one" (Fabi 5). While having African ancestry but an optically white appearance would cause something of an identity crisis for anyone experiencing this "opposition," characters like Mary who place significant social emphasis on such a personal conflict justify, for Angela at least, the decision to pass for white.

It is worth noting, however, that while the dominant society's essentialist ideas about race limit the way other characters are able to understand Angela's identity, geographic movement allows her to continue to pass for white by starting over as a young woman in New York City.

Although her family questions her decision, Angela responds by stating: “No, I think I’m just beginning to come to my senses. I’m sick, sick, sick of seeing what I want dangled right before my eyes and then having it snatched away from me and all of it through no fault of my own” (Fauset 77). In this case, constant movement ensures the ability to maintain the secret of her true racial identity which, if discovered, could be masked yet again simply by moving to a new city. Although geographic movement often becomes part of the formula to continue passing intentionally, *Plum Bun* provides a critical transition to the next section of this chapter which examines characters who pass intentionally but ultimately have plans to reclaim a black identity, an ideological shift that occurs for Angela during the latter half of the text.

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The most critical distinction within the category of intentional passing narratives is between those characters who never intend to acknowledge their African ancestry and those characters that, while intentionally passing for white at a particular moment, have plans to eventually openly identify with their African-American heritage. More specifically, what sets the latter manifestation of intentional passing narratives apart from other intentional (and unintentional) passing narratives is the fact that the scene of revelation is reclaimed as an auto-revelation in which the passer takes pride in a black identity, effectively undermining the power of the dominant white society to assign blackness a negative connotation. One of the problems with this “racial homecoming,” as Gayle Wald defines it, is the fact that reclaiming blackness necessarily means perpetuating the racial binary that caused the passer to mask his or her true identity out of shame in the first place (45). As Wald argues, however:

[So] long as we valorize passing narratives according to their success in imagining the transcendence of social definition, we are bound to be disappointed

by them. On the other hand, by approaching these narratives with the idea that they are concerned with questioning and redefining 'transcendence' itself, then we begin to see how they elucidate the mobilization of social definition to articulate needs and interests that do not merely respond to or replicate the wishes of the dominant culture. (30)

In the American racial binary, as dictated by the dominant white society, any African ancestry is seen as tainting one's racial identity. However, passers who redefine and reclaim this black identity remove it from the context of the racist binary and are able to "elucidate the mobilization of social definition" independent of the "dominant culture."

Although Angela Murray never intended to reveal her identity, she ultimately decides to stop living the fictional life of a white woman and to begin identifying as black in all aspects of her life. After revealing the painful past that has led him to pass, Anthony Cross, Angela's optically white and legally black love interest, says to Angela: "You're a white American. I know there's nothing too dastardly for them to attempt where colour is involved" (Fauset 286). Upon hearing these words from Anthony, who has begun to assume the worst in Angela because of her false affiliation with whiteness, Angela is seized by "a fantastic notion... Of course she would tell him that she was coloured, that she was willing to live with coloured people. And if he needed assurance of her love, how much more fully would he believe in her when he realized that not even for the sake of the conveniences to be had by passing would she keep her association with white people secret from him" (Fauset 286). This pivotal passage demonstrates one of the events that changes Angela's mind about passing, forcing her to realize that living a fiction is even more isolating than being part of a minority (Pfeiffer 119). Although she will no

longer be part of the dominant culture, standing in solidarity with other African Americans offers more validation of her identity than passing for white.

While Angela decides privately that she will cease to pass in the near future, the manner in which she reveals herself is extremely public. When Angela arrives in New York, she begins attending art classes and establishes a somewhat rocky friendship with Miss Powell, the only optically black student in the class. After both women win an art contest and the opportunity to travel to Paris, the committee determines that Miss Powell cannot accept the prize because she is black. When Angela goes to visit Miss Powell shortly after this announcement, she enters the apartment to find a group of reporters asking rather offensive questions about the artist's optic race. Angela stands up for herself and her friend and says "if Miss Powell isn't wanted, I'm not wanted either. You imply that she's not wanted because she's coloured. Well, I'm coloured too" (Fauset 347). After a reporter tells her to retract her statement, Angela says "Take it back!... Do you really think that being coloured is as awful as all that? Can't you see that to my way of thinking it's a great deal better to be coloured and to miss – oh – scholarships and honours and preferments, than to be the contemptible things which you've all shown yourselves to be this morning?" (Fauset 347).

While Angela's display of solidarity is certainly admirable, this scene cannot be read without accounting for the fact that although she might now identify as "coloured," Angela still appears optically white and has not had the experience of being an African-American woman in public for several years. Although it would be nice to read this scene purely as a victory for solidarity within the African American community, the fact that Miss Powell needs Angela, an optically white woman, to stand up to the reporters for her limits the narrative's ability to

honestly assert that Angela's scene of auto-revelation is performed in a way that legitimately allows her to claim an African-American identity.

In a similar vein to Angela Murray's decision to finally embrace her black identity, Iola Leroy also passes but with the intention of revealing herself as black when it is safe for her to do so. However, while Iola does not pass ideologically or wish that she were white for social advancement, she also chooses not to correct those who assume she is white based on her racial optic. This is not to say, of course, that none of her colleagues in the army hospital where she is volunteering as a nurse know about her racial heritage. In fact, Colonel Robinson tells Dr. Gresham, Iola's first love interest, that she was a slave ("She has not requested secrecy, but at present, for her sake, I do not wish the secret revealed. Miss Leroy was a slave" [Harper 58]). Although Iola is not actively hiding her race in the same manner as Tom Driscoll or Angela Murray, she allows Dr. Gresham to continue thinking that she is white and she thus continues to pass. While this sort of intentional passing is, of course, out of self preservation – by law she would have been returned to slavery if Confederate forces were to capture her – Iola still takes advantage of the assumptions others make based on her optic race as a response to structural racism.

However, when Dr. Gresham eventually proposes marriage to Iola she can no longer continue to live this fiction and must let him know about her true identity. Although Dr. Gresham is already aware of Iola's racial background, this scene of auto-revelation is still symbolic of the pride she feels in her African-American ancestry as she tells him: "Doctor, I could not promise. I do not think that I should. There are barriers between us I cannot pass. Were you to know them I think you would say the same" (Harper 109). In a way, it might have seemed more socially progressive for Iola to accept Dr. Gresham's proposal because such an acceptance would have

implied that both were able to look beyond their racial differences in light of their love for one another. Iola's decision to reject Dr. Gresham, however, demonstrates that color-blindness was not Harper's goal in the text (Pfeiffer 30). To marry Dr. Gresham would have meant that Iola could not have expressed her identity as fully as she would be able to if she married a man who identified as African-American, which Iola ultimately does. Harper's goal was not to move beyond race but to instill a sense of race pride, to make sure the "shadows" were "uplifted" rather than erased.

Furthermore, it is important to note the language Harper uses when Iola rejects Dr. Gresham's proposal. By identifying the barriers Iola is unable to "pass," the passage gives new meaning to the word "pass" as Iola confronts the insurmountable barrier of legal whiteness; although Iola can pass physically as white, she will never be able to pass or move beyond the legal definition of her race. So while Iola still cannot pass certain barriers, the fact that she chooses not to pass even when she can is more significant. As Iola says to Dr. Gresham, "Doctor, you know not what you ask... Instead of coming into this hospital a self-sacrificing woman... I came as a rescued slave, glad to find a refuge from a fate more cruel than death" (Harper 113). Although Iola feels a certain sense of guilt about her decision to pass during the war, at this critical moment in American history during the shift from legal to economic and *de facto* slavery, the views of and purpose of black-to-white racial passing in American literature were moving towards "efforts to pathologize cultural difference... through a public assertion of [a passer's] loyalties to the race" (Borgstrom 96). Therefore, Iola could not have married Dr. Gresham because to do so would have meant continuing to pass ideologically, a dangerous pitfall in a novel meant to tell the story of a woman who had pride in her African-American ancestry during a time when such a position was not only unpopular but potentially dangerous or fatal.



Just as Dr. Gresham has prior knowledge of Iola's race, Dr. Olney is aware of Rhoda Aldgate's African ancestry in *An Imperative Duty* before she actually tells him. When Aunt Caroline first reveals Rhoda's secret to Olney privately, "In his instantaneous mental processes, Olney kept his attention fixed upon Mrs. Meredith, and he was aware of her gasping out: 'My niece is of negro descent.' Olney recoiled from the words, in a turmoil of emotion for which there is no term but disgust" (Howells 30-1). Because Olney has already experienced this visceral reaction to the revelation of Rhoda's identity in a private setting, it begs the question of whether the impact of a scene of self-revelation is diminished when the person to whom the passer's race will be revealed is already aware of her African-American ancestry.

In Howells' scene of auto-revelation, Olney asks for Rhoda's hand in marriage, a proposal she would like to accept but cannot because she has not been totally honest with him. During Olney's proposal, "She let her hand seem to sink deeper in his hold, which had somehow not released it yet; she almost pushed it in for an instant, and then she pulled it violently away. 'Never!' She sprang to her feet and gasped hoarsely out, 'I am a negress!' Something in her tragedy affected Olney comically... He smiled. 'Well, not a very black one. Besides, what of it, if I love you?'" (Howells 94). Part of the reason this scene is repeated in both Howells' and Harper's work is the fact that the female passing is the ingénue, whom Sidney Bremer defines as:

[A] young woman [who] often makes only one determining choice for herself: the choice of accepting or rejecting the suitor – seldom more than one – who presents himself to her. But after years of repressing individual preferences of any kind, she usually cannot make up her mind when the moment for decision comes. A proposal of marriage throws a typical Howellsian ingénue into confusion. (145)

In reality, Rhoda has had very little agency in a life during which her aunt determined her race and Olney created her marriage plans. Therefore, it can be argued that Rhoda's scene of self-revelation does not necessarily "throw" Rhoda "into confusion" about her marriage but, in a more complicated crisis, raises questions about the intersection of marriage and racial identity.

At the same time, Rhoda's claim to a black identity still needs to be taken in context. While ideologically black, Rhoda is still optically white and this affects both Olney's proposal to her and her ability to accept this proposal. As Olney points out, there is a certain element of comedy in this revelation and Howells almost parodies the "confusion" Rhoda experiences because of Olney's proposal (94). Although this humor could be read as satirizing the racial binary, it feels more as if it trivializes Rhoda's moment of self-revelation, making a farce of the optically white woman's decision to identify ideologically as black. Furthermore, when Rhoda expresses her insecurities about the stability of an interracial relationship and Olney's having a black wife, he quips that at least she would not be "a very black one" (Howells 94). Although it's meant to be taken as an endearing joke, there is still a strong fear of miscegenation underlying his statement, a topic addressed only in Aunt Caroline's (stereotypically) hysterical fear of atavism earlier in the text.

Especially with regards to *Iola Leroy* and *An Imperative Duty*, it is worth noting that although the passer's love interest already knows her secret ahead of time, he still allows her to reveal her race herself. Harper and Howells provide a sense of racial ownership and pride to these women, even though Howells' portrayal is slightly more patronizing than Harper's. But in both cases, and in Fauset's *Plum Bun* as well, the individual becomes the arbiter of her own race, creating a stark contrast with unintentional passing, in which parents act as the arbiters of race, or intentional passing without the intention to reveal oneself, in which the public ultimately

becomes the arbiter of race. Passing narratives that are written to include characters that pass intentionally but have plans to ultimately reveal themselves serve as the most positive and productive response to racism. They encourage a sense of pride in black identity not found in other narratives where characters choose death or physical relocation as responses to racism, when they have the opportunity to take action at all.

### III. Traversing the Color Line: Pauline Hopkins and the Path Back to Africa

The sun sought thy dim bed and brought forth light,  
The sciences were sucklings at thy breast;  
When all the world was young in pregnant night  
Thy slaves toiled at thy monumental best.  
Thou ancient treasure-land, thou modern prize,  
New peoples marvel at thy pyramids!  
The years roll on, thy sphinx of riddle eyes  
Watches the mad world with immobile lids.  
The Hebrews humbled them at Pharaoh's name.  
Cradle of Power! Yet all things were in vain!  
Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Fame!  
They went. The darkness swallowed thee again.  
Thou art the harlot, now thy time is done,  
Of all the mighty nations of the sun.

-- Claude McKay, "Africa"

Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* stands in a category by itself because for Hopkins, the solution to the psychological trauma of racism was the outright rejection of American society, manifested in a geographical move to Africa. The characters of Reuel Briggs, Dianthe Lusk and Aubrey Livingston pass intentionally and unintentionally, exposing both the failures of and the violence associated with a racist society that makes either living a fiction or expatriating to Africa the only safe alternatives to openly identifying as African-American. Hopkins utilizes a variety of passing narratives to deconstruct the color line, a concept first described by W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). While the racism produced by the color line propels the action of this text, Hopkins does not completely condemn the racial binary as other texts, such as *Passing* and *Plum Bun*, seem to do. Although Hopkins uses passing in *Of One Blood* to make an argument about the way racism could push an African American to feel as if he needed to return to Africa in order to fully express his identity, she also reframes this trauma by encouraging blacks to reclaim and redefine African and African-American heritage as a point of pride.

Reuel's identity crisis as an optically white African American is examined by the text in great detail, reflecting Du Bois' influence on Hopkins's work (McDowell xiii). In addition to (or perhaps because of) the black/white identity crisis addressed in the text, Reuel struggles to reconcile his private and public positions as an African-American individual who lives in a larger white-dominant, racist society. This idea, known as "double consciousness," was also first articulated *The Souls of Black Folk*. Although Hopkins does not directly cite the phrase in her work, she communicates the same concept through the title of her novel, known in its entirety as *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self*. "It is a peculiar sensation," Du Bois wrote, "this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others... One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (214-15). The idea that all Americans are of one blood is contrasted with the idea of an individual who can have thoughts and exist independently of a larger society, a notion that is reflected in the fact that Hopkins titles her work *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self*. While eliminating the color line appears to be a logical step towards dismantling America's structural racism, Hopkins recognizes that combating discrimination is more nuanced than a simple erasure. Rather, overlooking double consciousness and aspiring towards a color-blind society is not a constructive response to racism when there is power to be gained from pride in black identity.

While optic race is certainly the most obvious trigger for racism, the "hidden self" or ideological racial identity is what truly bears the brunt of discrimination. The entities of "race" and "mind," as Thomas Otten notes, are often paired together when discussing racial identity and, although this coupling seems balanced in theory, *Of One Blood's* opening "implies that

these doubles are rather imprecisely matched” (229). The reasoning behind a racial binary is inherently problematic because it does not allow for an identity any more nuanced than simply “black” or “white” and does not take into account the separation between optic and ideological race. However, the trope of passing in Hopkins’ work seeks to “reopen questions of racial identity that much of American culture was closing” at the time, making an effort to counteract the way in which racism silenced conversations about the possibility of more fluid racial identities (Otten 229). Rather than allowing these alternative identities to transcend the black/white binary, they were recast as “fictions” by the dominant culture. In response, Hopkins uses passing to emphasize the psychological harm of racism, which dictated whose identities were “real” and whose were “fictitious” in the context of American society.

What seems to interest Hopkins, then, is the reformulation of a passer’s racial identity beyond the physical boundaries of American society. When Reuel decides to pass for white Hopkins specifically advocates the back-to-Africa movement as a response to the racism which forces Reuel to feel too physically threatened to continue living in America. When Hopkins wrote *Of One Blood*, the nascent back-to-Africa movement provided an alternative to the racism which characterized American society. The idea that blackness could be a source of pride rather than a source of shame stood in stark contrast passing’s requirement that light-skinned blacks submit to the dominant culture of whiteness to feel a sense of accomplishment and safety from racial violence. Another issue addressed by both the passing narratives and the back-to-Africa movement was the denial of one’s race and African or African-American heritage. This rejection of blackness was caused in no small part by “feelings of inferiority and self-hatred among blacks” that were triggered by racism, and a response to this sense of “inferiority and self-hatred” was to pass as white (Takaki 128). Rather than accepting the burden of fitting in as an African

American, it was easier to deny African-American ancestry and live the life of a white American. The back-to-Africa movement, however, sought a more active approach by refocusing the conversation from the internalization of racial inferiority to embracing blackness as a source of power.

Reuel Briggs exemplifies this internalized inferiority, demonstrated by the obligation he feels to pass as white as a means of social advancement and survival, physically and psychologically. In spite of this sense of obligation, “white” is not the identity Reuel *wants* to embody. Even though Reuel “had tormented himself for months,” his “courage was yet wanting for strength to rend the veil” because giving up the white identity he had so carefully crafted and maintained would have meant exposing himself to a brand of racism that could harm him mentally and physically (Hopkins 2). Hopkins touches upon another facet of passing here, specifically the concept of “the veil.” As Du Bois describes it, “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (214-15). Reuel’s veil, then, is somewhat unique because although he has a “second-sight” into the life of black America, his light skin presents another veil that allows him to silently observe this world without others’ knowledge. Although Hopkins identifies Reuel’s lack of “courage” and “strength” to do away with his unique veil, it is also worth questioning if perhaps he benefited from being able to observe and experience both societies to better understand how race functioned in America. At the same time, Reuel’s veil only does so much good because maintaining the veil means never sharing his observations with anyone without revealing his black identity. This also demonstrates the ways in which passing was at times as psychologically traumatic as racism because of the isolation and alienation associated with

passing, in addition to the unique “double consciousness” that Du Bois identifies as a blessing and a curse for African Americans.

Because Hopkins addresses both physical and psychological aspects of Reuel’s decision to pass, we see both the cause of and response to racism that existed in American society during this time. While possessing “white” features makes it easy enough for Reuel to pass, the psychological effects of his decision paint a very different picture. When we first meet Reuel we learn “he was a reticent man who knew how to suffer in silence” and that “morbid thoughts... haunted him all day: To what use all this persistent hard work for a place in the world – clothes, food, a roof? Is suicide wrong? he asked himself with tormenting persistency” (Hopkins 1). Although Reuel appears to have beaten the system by passing for white, in reality the system shows no signs of weakness or future redemption for darker-skinned African Americans. As a result, Reuel is pushed to contemplate suicide because his identity as a light-skinned African American cannot exist in the context of a racial binary. Reuel’s passing narrative is not triumphant because he is able to enjoy white privilege; rather, it is a sad acknowledgement of the fact that success is based on the dual requirement of optic whiteness and the absence of African or African-American ancestry.

An alternate story unfolds, however, when Reuel finds himself in Telassar, embracing his roots in a hidden and ancient Ethiopian city. In one of Hopkins’ first descriptions of Telassar, she writes that the city’s residents are “pure-blooded Ethiopian” (124). Because this society emphasizes the purity of its blood, Telassar seems to go against Hopkin’s call for humanity to remember its shared blood, leaving the reader to question if the Ethiopians are that much more accepting of fluid racial identities than Americans are. Though it would appear that Telassar has a color line just as problematic as America’s racial binary, the purity of Ethiopian blood is not



given the same importance as the purity of white blood is given in American society. Though he appears white enough to pass in America, Reuel does not have to pass as black to come into power in Ethiopian society. Instead, Reuel relies on his heritage even though he had “hidden his Ehtiopian extraction from the knowledge of the world,” although “It was a tradition among those who had known him in childhood that he was descended from a race of African kings” (Hopkins 125). Reuel always knew about his African ancestry but he refused to acknowledge it due to the negative economic, political, and physical ramifications of admitting kinship with African Americans. Once he arrives in Africa and the city of his ancestors, however, he sees fit to seize upon the power of his blackness and become the ruler of Telassar.

It is important to note, however, that Reuel is not motivated to rule over Telassar in order to reclaim the power he would not have been able to possess in the United States as an African-American man. Rather, Reuel begins to interact with his African heritage to make up for the years of shame he experienced while passing for white in America. When Ai, Reuel’s Ethiopian adviser, asks the new king if in America “the Ethiopian there is counted less than other mortals,” Reuel affirms Ai’s suspicions:

It is true, Ai... There, the dark hue of your skin, your waving hair with its trace of crispness, would degrade you below the estate of any race outside the Ethiopian, for it is a deep disgrace to have within the veins even one drop of the blood you seem so proud of possessing,”... [O]ver his face passed a flush of shame. He felt keenly now that fact that he had played the coward’s part in hiding his origin. (Hopkins 129)

Although Reuel blames himself for being a “coward,” we have to wonder if it would have been possible for him to maintain his safety in America if he had identified as African-American.

While Reuel is certainly justified in feeling ashamed, there were also a limited number of spaces in the racist society where he could safely express the pride that Ai feels in his African heritage.

As a counterpoint to America's rampant racism, living in Telassar provides Reuel with the opportunity not only to safely identify with his African heritage but to actually embrace this long-suppressed aspect of his identity. When Reuel first explores Telassar, he wanders the ruins in search of the heart of the city and, in the midst of his explorations, is drugged by the city guards and taken to the city's center. However, this moment is much more significant than a simple geographic transition from the uninhabited to the inhabited sector of the city:

He turned to retrace his steps; something came out of the darkness like a hand, passed before his face emitting a subtle odor as it moved; he sank upon the ground and consciousness left him... From profound unconsciousness, deep, merciful, oblivious to pain and the flight of time, from the gulf of the mysterious shadows wherein earth and heaven are alike forgotten, Reuel awoke at the close of the fourth day after his entrance into the Great Pyramid... Great pain, whether physical or mental, cannot last long, and human anguish must find relief or take it.  
(Hopkins 112)

In this passage, Reuel returns not only physically but mentally to Africa. Although he attempts to "retrace his steps" and return to whiteness, the hand which emerges from the darkness seduces him and disrupts his white consciousness. This leaves Reuel in the "profound unconsciousness" of blackness, a state with which he is unfamiliar because he was never allowed to embrace his black identity in America. Hopkins' description of total, pure blackness ("the gulf of the mysterious shadows wherein earth and heaven are alike forgotten") places Reuel as far from

whiteness as he has ever experienced and positions him as at the vanguard of the back-to-Africa movement.

Although much of the above passage can be taken both literally and figuratively, Hopkins' final statement – that “Great pain, whether physical or mental, cannot last long, and human anguish must find relief or take it” – speaks directly to the trauma both experienced first-hand and inherited by Reuel as an African American. Initially, Reuel consciously traveled to Africa as a means of combating his unemployment; unconsciously, however, we are forced to question whether the psychological trauma of Reuel's passing and the inherited trauma of slavery forced him to flee America for a space where he could begin to understand his African heritage. While Hopkins certainly exposes the trauma caused by racism and the color line, it seems counterproductive that she places such an emphasis on blackness because it forces her to remain constricted by the color line, rather than transcending it. While it might seem counterintuitive for Hopkins to support an essentialist view of race, in the context of America's historical racism erasing the color line would mean eliminating and delegitimizing the trauma experienced by millions of African Americans, from Middle Passage (another form of passing/passage) to the present. Therefore, rather than ignoring the color, line Hopkins writes within this framework to reclaim African and African-American identities as a source of pride. Although this approach maintains a racial binary, it undermines the positive/negative dichotomy associated with whiteness and blackness, respectively, and poses a challenge to the dominant culture's ability to cast blackness in a negative light.

Although Reuel's passage from whiteness to blackness is a radical endorsement of black pride as a response to racism, this transition does not occur immediately. As Hopkins once again utilizes Du Bois' double-consciousness metaphor, there is a proliferation of veil imagery

surrounding Reuel's introduction to Ethiopian society. In the span of six pages, Hopkins variously describes the way in which Reuel experiences the lifting of the veil: at one point he "lifted one of the curtains at the side of the room"; upon entering another room, he "[Threw] aside a curtain of rich topaz silk"; at another point he had "The silken curtains... drawn [on] one side" for him; when walking with Ai "they halted before a curtain which parted silently for their entrance"; and finally, when Reuel is presented for the first time to his subjects "the curtains before him parted silently, and he found himself alone on a raised platform" (115; 117; 119; 120; 121). This image of a curtain lifting to allow Reuel access to Ethiopian society echoes the way Du Bois' veil has been lifted to allow Reuel unrestricted access to his African heritage, free of the harmful influence of American whiteness.

Eric Sundquist identifies the multiple meanings of the veil, noting that pulling back the curtain in this context means revealing the true meaning behind "racist historiography and evolutionary social theory" in addition to lifting the "veil of ignorance about [the] African past, in some cases even [the] slave past, that has fallen on the present generation" of African Americans ("The Spell of Africa" 573). Though it appears on the surface that Hopkins' argument about racism centers on the back-to-Africa movement as a response to racism, it is actually a problem of African Americans' lack of pride in and knowledge about their African heritage. One reason racism functioned so effectively as a system of oppression is that slaves and their descendants were denied access to their common history when they were forced to come to the United States. African Americans have been – and continue to be – subjected to a dominant historical narrative that erased any mention of their African heritage. Lifting the veil or the curtain to reveal Reuel's black identity, then, means not only changing his perception of himself

as an individual but also the way he understands his place in African history, outside the dominant white historical narrative of the United States (Sundquist, “The Spell of Africa” 573).

\* \* \*

Although Reuel actively chooses to pass as white, other characters in the text contribute stories of unintentional passing and enter into conversation with the works by Twain, Harper, and Howells I examined in Chapter I. When the optically white and legally black Dianthe Lusk suffers memory loss after a train accident, Reuel consciously decides not to reveal Dianthe’s African heritage either to her or to the public. Following the formula of other unintentional passing narratives, Reuel fills the role of the parent as an arbiter of race, reflected in the infantilizing language Hopkins uses to describe Dianthe after the accident. When Reuel first visits Dianthe in the hospital, the narrator notes that she was “breathing softly like a tired child” and later, when Reuel reveals his romantic feelings and proposes marriage to her, it is “with the sigh of a tired child [that she] crept into his arms, and into his heart for all time and eternity” (Hopkins 35; 56). These descriptions of Dianthe as a child fit the form of unintentional passing narratives in which it is assumed by an optically white and legally black parent that his or her child – or, in this case, the symbolic equivalent – would be better off living as a white American than an African American. In this instance, Hopkins uses unintentional passing to make an argument about the ways in which racism causes a brand of shame so severe that black parents and guardians feel the need to interfere with their children’s ability to form a racial identity by assigning their children “whiteness” and erasing any question of “blackness.”

However, Dianthe eventually learns about her African heritage when Aubrey Livingston reveals this information to her after Reuel leaves for Africa and can no longer continue to maintain the fiction of his wife’s white identity. After learning about her legal race, the narrator

notes the way in which “the white-faced girl turned to [Aubrey] in despair the more eloquent because of her quietness” (Hopkins 68). Similar to scenes of revelation in other unintentional passing narratives, there is a particular emphasis on Dianthe’s optic race in this passage with the description of her as a “white-faced girl.” While this could be taken literally as a means of drawing attention to the lightness of her skin, the image of a “white-faced girl” also evokes the fear and horror Dianthe might have felt at this revelation and echoes the “ashen” face of Tom Driscoll during the scene of revelation in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (Twain 141). This terror almost immediately provokes the literal and figurative silencing of Dianthe’s voice as she transitions from a white to a black individual, noted in the “quietness” which characterizes her response and speaks directly to the structures of racism which limit African-American voices in American society. At the moment when Dianthe’s African heritage is revealed, the resulting fear and shame that eliminate her ability to speak are both byproducts of and contributors to the continued power of American racism.

A second example of unintentional passing can be found in the story of Aubrey Livingston who, for his entire life and for most of the reader’s experience, believes himself to be a white American and takes full advantage of this race location. Whereas the reader knew Dianthe was black even if she herself did not know, in Aubrey’s case the reader is shocked to eventually learn that Aubrey is optically white and legally black (Hopkins 163). Though Dianthe is able to deceive society by passing for white, Aubrey deceives both the fictional society and Hopkins’ audience to make an even stronger case for passing’s ability to expose the totally unfounded nature of racism. This story line also speaks to the fact that many “white” Americans might be actually be “black” in accordance with the one-drop rule and are simply not aware of it, speaking once again to the fears of “contamination” and “impurity” that, after centuries of sexual

violence, are not merely abstract but part of a concrete reality. As Aubrey's deceptive narrative demonstrates, the artificial color line tells us nothing more than what we can already see: the color of someone's skin, an external feature which has no biological bearing on the internal features of their being.

Although Hopkins wrote *Of One Blood* well after slavery was abolished, African Americans still suffered trauma at the hands of the racism which pervaded American society. To demonstrate this shame and fear associated with identifying as African-American Hopkins utilizes multiple passing narratives in the text as a way of illuminating the fear and shame that would push passers to attempt to subvert the color line. At the same time, it is important to consider the subtitle of Hopkins' work, *The Hidden Self*, which reminds us that the goal of the text "is clearly not to abandon race thinking entirely" (McDowell xv). Although the biological justification of different races is a myth, it is still necessary to acknowledge the social, cultural, and legal implications of "whiteness" and "blackness." Hopkins speaks to this distinction after Reuel, Dianthe, and Aubrey have all been revealed as black:

The slogan of the hour is "Keep the Negro down!" but who is clear enough in vision to decide who hath black blood and who hath it not? Can any one tell? No, not one; for in His own mysterious way He has united the white race and the black race in this new continent. By the transgression of the law He proves His own infallibility: "Of one blood have I made all nations of men to dwell upon the whole face of the earth," is as true today as when given to the inspired writers to be recorded. No man can draw the dividing line between the two races, for they are both of one blood! (178)

Ultimately, Hopkins' argument concerning racism is based in the belief that one's individual identity – black, white, or other – should not be reason for the dominant society to inflict physical or psychological harm on those who are trapped on the “wrong side” of the color line. And while it would be nice to uproot this racism and heal American race relations, according to Hopkins a path back to Africa is always open to African Americans.



#### IV. Afterword

I've learned that there is no 'right' way of managing the issue of my racial identity, no way that will not offend or alienate someone, because my designated racial identity itself exposes the very concept of racial classification as the offensive and irrational instrument of racism it is.

--Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black"

While the passing narratives I have examined certainly reflect racism's effects during the historical time period in which they were written, it is also worth considering how they interact with the current dominant and non-dominant discourses regarding race in American society. Taken as a whole, these passing narratives present a complex response to the specific racism of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries which included lynching, federally sanctioned disfranchisement, and the system of economic slavery created by sharecropping and tenant farming. However, these particular manifestations of racism reflect general themes that continue to define racism in the twenty-first century: psychological and physical intimidation, the silencing of African-American voices in politics and the presence of legal and social institutions that reinforce systems of economic inequality to preserve the color line persist into our own time and continue to necessitate passing as a means of hiding from, exposing and interrogating racism. Whereas Howells employed passing to neutralize issues of racism and trivialize notions of black pride, Twain and Larsen looked to passing as a means of critiquing dominant white society and the psychological trauma caused by racism. The most radical use of passing, however, can be found in the work of Harper, Hopkins and Fauset, who included the trope of passing as a way to comprehensively expose, critique, and combat racism by looking to black pride as an answer to racial discrimination.

It is interesting, then, to look at the way contemporary non-fiction passing narratives make an argument about racism and enter into conversation with earlier fictional passing narratives. One example can be found in Bliss Broyard's memoir of passing entitled *One Drop*:

*My Father's Hidden Life – A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (2007). Broyard details the story of her father Anatole's intentional passing for white and her own unintentional passing and subsequent struggle to define her identity as an optically white American woman with African-American ancestry.

A relevant point of comparison between this text and the passing narratives of earlier authors is the scene of revelation in which Broyard's mother reveals the secret of her children's African-American ancestors. When Sandy, Bliss' mother, finally decides to tell her children that their father Anatole is not white but African American, she reveals this information rather bluntly, stating: "Your father's part black" (16). After the Broyard siblings receive this information and begin to joke about embracing their African-American heritage, Sandy stops them and says "This isn't something you should be telling everyone. Anyway, you kids aren't black. You're white" (17). F. James Davis speaks to Sandy's logic when he notes that while America certainly has a problem with racism, the bigger issue is how we define who is black and therefore traumatized by racism (15). As long as we follow the centuries-old definition of what it means to be an African American – and subsequently classify certain optically white Americans as African Americans, as Sandy does – there will be a need for passing narratives to articulate the uniquely American experience of opposing definitions of ideological and optic race that a single person can embody. Although over a century has passed since the publication of most of the passing narratives I have examined, Broyard is still faced with the same identity crisis as the light-skinned African-American women in *Iola Leroy*, *An Imperative Duty*, *Plum Bun*, and *Passing*, reflecting the lack of progress with regards to the way we understand "mixed" racial backgrounds in the United States.

What has changed during this century-long span, however, is the way in which Broyard is able to respond to the revelation of her blackness. Rather than experiencing the horror, anguish and shame identified in earlier scenes of revelation, Broyard initially responds with curiosity and a budding sense of black pride when she states: “I had always bought into the idea of the American ‘melting pot,’ and now I was an example of it. The idea thrilled me, as though I’d been reading a fascinating history book and then discovered my own name in the index. I felt like I mattered in a way that I hadn’t before” (17). To be sure, this statement is made somewhat problematic because of the way in which Broyard is able to exoticize blackness (“The idea thrilled me;” “I felt like I mattered in a way that I hadn’t before”) without having to endure the trauma of racism because she still inhabits a white body. One of Broyard’s optically black cousins, whom she met after learning about her African-American heritage, sums up this issue quite well when he asks rhetorically: “So this girl finds out her daddy’s black and now she’s come down here and wants to be black too? That’s plain foolishness” (205).

This cousin’s frustration with Broyard’s ability to both exploit the privilege of optic whiteness and to infiltrate African-American spaces by virtue of her “invisible blackness” also speaks to the issue of how Broyard controls the way her race is perceived by society. Similar to Clare Kendry in Larsen’s *Passing*, by virtue of her “mismatched” optic and ideological race Broyard, like Clare before her, is forced to exist simultaneously on both sides of the color line. What differs between Clare’s and Broyard’s experiences, however, is Larsen’s choice to end Clare’s life during the narrative’s conclusion in a symbolic representation of the impossibility of identifying as both “black” and “white” at the same time. Broyard’s experience is different from Clare’s, though, because in her non-fiction narrative she builds on a foundation of black pride created by the fictional and non-fictional light-skinned African Americans who came before her.

From Rhoda Aldgate's decision to continue intentionally passing in *An Imperative Duty* to Angela Murray's public and proud declaration of her blackness in *Plum Bun*, a shift from race concealment to race pride created the space in which Broyard is able to identify as an optically white and ideologically African-American woman. Though she is still certainly faced by the threat of psychological and physical trauma as a result of racism in society at large, at the very least she can privately build an identity based on the successes and failures of identity formation of those who came before her.

Perhaps the most important factor in Broyard's development of a black identity, though, is the fact that she has not internalized the one-drop rule. Rather, she seems to accept that American definitions of race will never fully describe her identity. Although Twain's Tom Driscoll literally would have killed to defy the drops of "black blood" that defined his identity, subsequent passing narratives began to combat this racial ideology. Fauset's Angela Murray, for example, had to expatriate to evade the trauma of the one-drop rule and Larsen's Clare Kendry committed psychological – and perhaps physical – suicide to escape racism, because these characters could not survive in the U.S. as mixed-race individuals. Clare and Angela understood both the falsehood of American race theory and the fact that, despite this understanding, they would still suffer the trauma of racism from external sources no matter how well they avoided internalizing discrimination. While the one-drop rule is still a fundamental part of dominant racial discourse, earlier passing narratives positioned Broyard to take pride in her African-American heritage and to realize the myth racial purity as she concludes: "I may never be able to answer the question *What am I?* yet the fault lies not in me but with the question itself. And with that realization, that letting go, I can finally say good-bye" (463).

\* \* \*

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